
Mining and resistance

That mining can pose a threat to the integrity of forests is obvious. Clearance of surface vegetation and soils to gain access to sub-surface minerals has evident and often long-lasting impacts. Surface scarring by mines themselves, with associated erosion and siltation, is exacerbated by spoil heaps, tailings dams, associated mining works, disrupted water tables, and local chemical changes, including acid mining drainage and the release of heavy metals and the consequent pollution of soils and waterways. Mining operations use, and too often pollute, vast quantities of water.

Mines can also be massive consumers of timber for construction. Where mineral resources are extensive, the damage can affect substantial areas either through huge open-cast mining operations or through the combined impacts of a multitude of small-scale mines. Any local communities previously dependent on the renewable natural resources in these areas suffer immediate losses as a result, with their livelihoods undermined, their social organizations disrupted and their cultures transformed. Cash compensations, if paid, cannot restore these losses and the dark legacy of mining continues even after a mine is abandoned.

The impacts of mines, however, often spread far wider than this. Mining can be very lucrative, and large- and medium-scale operations may command huge investments and generate substantial returns. Mining in remote forest areas thus often implies the establishment of major infrastructures – roads, ports, townships, river diversions, dams and power plants – all needed to make the mines themselves workable and productive. Downstream processing of ores requires additional industries, making further demands for energy, water and land.

Big mines often constitute the spearpoint of even larger development plans, which are designed to transform whole regions. Brazil's Grande Carajas project, for example, which centres on an iron ore mine operated by mining giant Vale, forms the centrepiece of a huge complex of railways, ports, dams, plantations and colonization schemes which is affecting tens of millions of hectares in the eastern Amazon in Brazil.

Vale was founded and operated for 55 years as a Brazilian state-owned company, until it was privatized in 1997. It is currently the second largest mining company in the world, with operations in 38 countries, and accounts for 15% of global iron production. (1)

Whether planned or unforeseen, mines and their associated infrastructures trigger widespread economic and social changes and environmental transformations. Roads, and the lure of employment opportunities in new mining districts, bring settlers into forest areas, overwhelming both local communities and the capacity of government institutions to regulate access to lands and forests. The power of the mining industry also has more enduring impacts on the political ecology of forests. Large-scale mines are the province of wealthy corporations and international capital and the over-enthusiastic promotion of mining thus results in enduring shifts in power away from local people and civil society in favour of international corporations and national elites. (2)

Many communities affected by mining operations do not accept the right of mining companies to

invade their territories and oppose mining as incompatible with their culture, their economies and their traditions.

This past May, after years of resistance in various parts of the world, communities opposed to the activities of the Brazilian mining giant Vale joined together for the Second International Meeting of People Affected by Vale. (3) Over 50 delegates from around the globe gathered in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, including delegations from Mozambique, Indonesia and Canada, as well as representatives of the Observatorio de Conflictos Mineros en América Latina (Latin American Mining Conflict Watch), or OCMAL. They discussed the company's current economic and political status, shared experiences of the company's impacts in different parts of the world, and developed strategies for resistance against the social and environmental consequences of the company's activities, defining future methods and activities for the short and medium term.

The first international meeting had taken place a year earlier, and since then, various initiatives have been carried out by the activists involved: participation in a number of Vale shareholders meetings, where they voiced the complaints and criticisms of local communities; the publication of a report on the impacts and damages caused by Vale around the world; and the filing of a lawsuit against two directors of the CSA steel company in Rio de Janeiro (CSA is a joint venture between Vale and German company Thyssenkrupp).

Participants in this year's meeting defined specific lines of action for the future. They will be fighting for the official designation of mining-free territories, for the right to "say no" to new mining operations, and for mandatory prior consultation of communities that will be affected. In cases where mining operations have already been established, they are demanding comprehensive reparations for the impacts and compensation for individuals and communities.

They also stressed their condemnation of the criminalization of those who participate in resistance efforts against mining, and demanded an end to the state subsidies received by Vale, which come from the public coffers.

Among their plans for the future, they will seek to widen the debate on the social function of mining, taking into account the current debate on the rights of nature and the right to well-being for all.

This article is based on information gathered from (1) Quanto Valem os Direitos Humanos? Relatório da Federação Internacional de Direitos Humanos e de Justiça Global a respeito dos impactos sobre os direitos humanos da indústria mineira e siderúrgica de Açailândia, 18/05/2011, <http://www.justicanostrilhos.org/nota/732>; (2) "Undermining the forests. The need to control transnational mining companies: a Canadian case study", by Forest Peoples Programme, Philippine Indigenous Peoples Links and World Rainforest Movement, <http://www.wrm.org.uy/publications/undermining.pdf>; (3) II Encontro Internacional dos Atingidos pela Vale, 01/05/2011, <http://www.justicanostrilhos.org/nota/721>